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ABSTRACT

Analysis of "the testing rip-off" featured in the January/February 1980 issue of the NEA Reporter provides the main arguments for proposing that the latent function of the protest of the National Education Association (NEA) is not directed against testing per se. Instead, the NEA protest is a political move directed toward shifting the locus of power relative to educational policy making from the "testmakers" to the NEA. Professional associations such as the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and others should consider the following questions: (1) how can we engage in the political fray in such a way that the least powerful--students--are the prime beneficiaries rather than pawns in a power struggle?: (2) how can we effectively utilize our collective expertise in the political arena without compromising our integrity?: (3) are we prepared to examine our own value premises and take an open stand upon them?: (4) are we prepared to re-orient our own priorities and engage in educational issues of national import?: and (5) how can we best exert ourselves proactively rather than reactively? (RL)

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"To Test or Not To Test Is Not the Question"

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"To Test or Not to Test Is Not the Question"

When Dr. Moellenberg first presented his response to "the testing rip-off" featured in the January/February 1980 issue of the NEA Reporter, I felt a vague sense of disquiet and distress. My reaction was not so much a function of disagreement with what a respected colleague had to say -- indeed I could find no point of disagreement -- but rather that neither the question as posed in his title nor the answers given in the text really got at the heart of the matter. Since that time I have puzzled off and on about these issues, and Wayne's gentle nudging and this symposium provided the needed motivation to resolve them. In brief, what I propose is that to test or not to test is not the question; rather, that the more fundamental questions are (1) How shall society's goods be distributed? and (2) What are the ethical premises which undergird such distribution? Both questions imply a third, namely, Who shall decide upon the distribution? I shall address all three questions, however briefly, but first it may be useful to trace out the train of thought which led to the reformulation of Wayne's original question.

Testing is, incontrovertibly I think, a form of evaluation. Indeed, in educational settings testing appears to be the most prevalent form of evaluation whether the tests are teacher made, norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, standardized, or whatever. Further, the tests are used to make judgments (a commonly perceived function of evaluation), whether those judgments are with respect to pupil placement, minimum competency, need for remediation, suitability for graduate school,

promotion to the next grade, or the like. Finally, one might note that in some evaluation modes, e.g., goal-based a la James Popham, evaluation and testing are so inextricably intertwined that testing and evaluation become functionally synonymous. Hence Terry Herndon, the NEA Executive Director, was probably correct in stating that "Perhaps 90 million lives are affected by data collected by the Educational Testing Service" (NEA Reporter, frontispiece).

The next link in the logic train may be more controversial. I hold with an increasing number of political scientists and evaluation experts (Sjoberg, 1975; Weiss, 1975; House, 1974, 1976; Cohen, 1973; Stroufe, 1977) that evaluation is fundamentally a political process. If that thought is discomfiting, take some solace from the following definitions of "politics":

> . . . politics has to do with the distribution of stakes within a society or group. "Stakes" means jobs, money, prestige, influence, status, or even acceptance of ideas. People care enough about such stakes to try to influence their distribution. To this end they develop and husband their influence, and seek to use it wisely to affect the distribution of stakes. "Politics ain't bean bag."
>
> (Sroufe, 1977, p. 295)

. . .

> ["Politics is] the authoritative allocation of values" (Easton, 1965)

. . .

Both definitions are succintly captured in the title of Harold Lasswell's book: Politics: Who Gets What, When, How.

To summarize the argument thus far, testing is a form of evaluation, evaluation is a political process,and the essence of politics is the distribution of societal goods. Hence testing becomes a means by which decisions are made relative to distribution. Education is one of those allocated "stakes."

The foregoing conception of testing casts the issues presented in the NEA Reporter in a very different light. Briefly stated, the attack on the "testing rip-off" was never intended to be a scholarly or deliberate examination of testing in either its technical or applied senses, but was a manifest attempt to politically persuade. Let me support this stance by quickly scanning the Reporter's contents.

The frontispiece of the issue shrills "Teachers and Citizens Protest the Testing Rip-off." While the latter part of the headline is presented in bolder type than the rest, the clue to the political content is found in the word "protest." Protests have a long historical and political tradition. Consider if you will the revolutionist's protests over a tax on tea, the abolitionist's protests over slavery, the prohibitionist's protests over demon rum, or the student protest over Viet Nam and the draft. However, the manifest focus of protest, taxes, prohibition, or whatever, typically masks a more basic concern with altering some aspect of the social order. Surely this was true in all of the examples just cited, e.g., protesting the tax on tea was symbolic and symptomatic of a desire to alter the political relationship between Great Britian and the American Colonies. In short, both manifest and latent agendas are typically operative in protest movements, and one is well-advised not to be blinded by the manifest.

Page 2 of the Reporter headlines "Thousands of NEA Teachers Demand Iran Free Hostages." The lead paragraph of the article reads:

> At the urging of NEA, thousands of teachers around the nation have been sending letters and mailgrams protesting Iran's capture of American diplomats and demanding freedom for them.

The second feature is captioned "NEA Teachers Celebrate the New Department of Education." Three photographs accompany the brief text. Featured in the photographs are Secretary of Education Hufstedler (twice) and Congressman Drinan. Rounding out page 2 is "NEA Resolution H79-92. Human Rights." The political content of p 2 is surely obvious.

Pages 3-6 are devoted to protesting the "testing rip-off." Here the political emphasis is less obvious and I'll return to it later for a more extensive analysis. Let me point out at this time only some of the contextual features of the conference out of which the protest grew. The theme of the conference was "Testing Reform: Strategies for the 1980's." It was sponsored by the Center for the Study of Education and Politics, held at the NEA Center in Washington, D.C., included representatives from the NEA, National PTA, Public Interest Research Group, the NAACP, and Ralph Nader's Center for Responsive Law, and culminated in calling for national legislation relative to truth-in-testing. This configuration rather clearly suggests a political orientation.

However, lest anyone miss this general thrust, pp. 7-9, the centerfold, make the politics of education explicit. Presented is

a "Legislative Report Card" on the first session of the 96th (1979) Congress. Five Senate and six House bills are identified along with the voting record of each Senator and Congressman. More imprtant for present purposes, voting patterns are identified as "Right," i.e., "right according to NEA position," or "Wrong", i.e., "wrong according to NEA position." Further, the introductory text concludes with the statement, "Teacher political action committees conduct such assessment, and you should become familiar with these activities."

The remainder of this issue of the NEA Reporter can be passed over quickly. Page 10 carries a major piece entitled "NEA Legal Services Enforce Teacher Rights;" p. 11 its "Human Rights Report;" p. 12 the "NEA Financial Report to Members;" p. 13 a series of announcements; and pp. 14-16 "Letters to the Editors" and advertisements. In sum, substantively the entire issue is politically oriented,and in my judgment it is in that light that the "protest" over the "testing rip-off" is properly assessed. Let me return now to that issue.

The essence of the NEA argument is, I think, captured in the following abstracts from the Reporter,many of which were previously quoted by Wayne:

1. "Parents, students, and many other segments of American society are seriously concerned about the enormous power wielded by the Educational Testing Service, the College Board, and other testing companies." (Ralph Nader, p. 3)

2. "Nader said ETS has the power to define a person's potential, the power to decide what a person needs to advance through society, and the power to create and deny opportunity." (p.3)
3. "English teachers will be a major force in the fight against multiple-choice tests." (Ralph Nader, p. 4)
4. "The power to test has given testmakers the power to alter curriculum." (Anne Kahn, former national secretary of the PTA, p. 4)
5. "Over 90 million people are affected by norm-referenced standardized tests. They decide everything from who is placed in classes for the mentally retarded, who gets into college, who can become a teacher or a lawyer, to whose children can get scholarships." (p.4)
6. "The most serious result of competency test misuse is . . . the effort by school districts to raise their rank in reading and math, forcing local school districts and teachers to surrender their own priorities." (Clyde McQueen, member, the Michigan Education Association task force on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, p. 5).
7. "As you begin formulating association priorities for 1980, I urge you to give top priority to promotion of truth-in-testing measures." (William McGuire, President, NEA, p. 5)
8. "A group of NEA teachers from all regions of the nation became experts on standardized testing issues during workshops of the annual NEA/IPD National Conference in December. These teachers

will appear at regional conferences and local workshops in 1980, ready to spread the truth-in-testing gospel." (p.6)

9. "Overreliance on standardized testing practices are under attack by teachers and civil rights groups from Maine to California." (p. 6)

The above excerpts are significant on a number of counts. Most notable, explicitly or implicitly, is their emphasis upon power, e.g., on ETS as institutionalized power in #1 and 2; English teachers in #3; school districts in #7. Second, the citations indicate a keen awareness of the power of power, e.g., "to alter curriculum" (#4); to determine educational placement, career opportunity, and financial resources (#5); to affect mass numbers of people (#5); and to establish "priorities" (#6). All of these are subsumable under the rubric of social goods or "stakes," and their distribution is clearly worth fighting for. Third, what is manifestly being advocated is a shift in the locus of power from "testmakers" (#4) symbolized by ETS to local school districts (#6) and teacher groups (NEA). And that shift will occur only as teachers in concord with civil rights groups exert political influence from Maine to California (#8). Read that way, citation #8 places the emphasis upon teachers "spreading the gospel" (or at least one version of the gospel) about truth-in-testing rather than becoming experts in standardized testing issues. More broadly, the entire series of articles brought together under the heading "Teachers and Citizens Protest the Testing Rip-off" can be construed as an attempt to alter the distribution of

one of society's basic goods -- education. So construed, testing is less an issue than a strategic point of attack. In a national election year such tactics should be readily apparent.

Noting that the protest over testing is a political ploy is, however, insufficient. Further inquiry must be made into the ethical premises which justify a reallocation of power. Thus for me, one of the most disturbing features of the Reporter's protest was that the ethical issue was literally unattended to. Only once is there an allusion to it, namely, Charles Grobon's statement that standardized testing is "immoral" (p. 6). And as Wayne has correctly pointed out, Grobon's case for the immorality of standardized testing is weak at best.

What is the relation between testing and ethics? I take the position that functionally ethical premises are social system specific. That is to say that what is perceived as ethical, right, moral or just in one social system may be perceived otherwise in another. In short, a kind of situational ethics prevails. Further, I'd argue that a society's ethics are largely inseparable from that society's dominant social, political, and economic institutions. Let me sketch these briefly for our present condition, drawing heavily upon the work of Sjoberg (1975) and Levine (1976).

I think we would agree that at least since the mid-19th century the U.S. can be characterized as a highly industrialized society normatively committed to the tenets of individualism, democracy, capitalism, and free enterprise. Further, such commitments have been enacted largely within freely constructed bureaucratic structures with corresponding

emphases upon rationality, hierarchy, productivity, and efficiency. Hence within, for example,the economic sector, the measure of a nation's health may be summarized in something called a GNP. In this context testing becomes imperative, particularly in personnel matters, since it would be patently irrational, inefficient, non-productive, non-cost effective, and non-scientific to leave such matters to chance. Further, it is instructive to recall that just at the time the U.S. was shifting from an agrarian to an industrialized economy, Darwin was explicating the principles of natural selection, Sir Francis Galton was applying these principles to eugenics and laying the groundwork for psychometrics, Binet was doing his original work in the measurement of intelligence, and psychology, the basic discipline for education, was busily mathematizing itself in its quest for legitimacy as a science. Add to this a massive influx of immigrants who were perceived (correctly) as a threat to the established social order and one has generated a cultural context in which the development of standardized testing and a testing industry was inevitable. Finally, this confluence of mutually reinforcing phenomenon affected all social institutions, schools included (Callahan, 1962), and within this particular social context testing was indeed "moral."

Notwithstanding the diatribe against testing, it is not at all clear what the alternative morality espoused by the NEA protesters is. The emphasis upon truth, as in "truth-in-testing,"is not persuasive absent a case supporting deception as the current standard. Further, testing itself is apparently not the issue given the statement "NEA strongly supports testing, and rigorous assessment of student performance" (p.5). Nor is one helped very much by the succeeding statement that "NEA rejects tests

that emphasize competition against norms rather than educational goals" (p.5) since neither the rational nor moral grounds for rejection are specified (Ebel, 1975). Similarly, one notes considerable inconsistency in advocating a return to the day of Horatio Alger ("[ETC] has meant an end to the Horatio Alger period in America." Ralph Nader, p. 3), and simultaneously protesting the use of norm-referenced (standardized) tests given that such tests were developed in the heyday of Algerianism and incorporate those values.

All of the above leads to the inescapable conclusion that the "protest" is not directed toward altering this society's basic ethical premises. Indeed, it affirms them. The corollary conclusion, then, and the basic thesis of this paper, is that the latent function of the protest is to shift the locus of power relative to educational policy making, implicitly from the "testmakers" to the NEA. The manifest protest against testing is therefore properly perceived as a strategic move in the larger struggle for political control. Consequently what are employed are classic political tactics: the identification of a villian (ETS); appeals to moral sensibilities ("it's immoral"); enlistment of allies (". . . and civil rights groups"); wide dissemination of a particular point of view ("spread the gospel"); media coverage (the NEA Reporter); double entendre ("standardized tests are crammable in more ways than one"); and wherewithal a heavy dose of rhetoric -- communication devoid perhaps of substance but nonetheless persuasive. In an increasingly politicized society such behavior is understandable.

All of this leads to posing an alternative set of "fundamental questions." Consider the following:

1. How can professional association like RMERA, AERA, APA, ASCD, and others engage in the political fray in such a way that the least powerful -- students -- are the prime beneficiaries rather than pawns in a power struggle?
2. How can such professional organizations effectively utilize their collective expertise in the political arena without compromising their integrity? Can it be done?
3. Are the professional associations prepared to examine their own value premises and take an open stand upon them? Dare they?
4. Are the professional associations prepared to re-orient their own priorities and narrowly construed interests and engage in educational issues of national import?
5. In an increasingly politicized climate, how can professional associations best exert themselves proactively rather than reactively? Can they establish rather than respond to others' agendas?

Questions like these are troublesome to most academics. Our professional training and socialization, our personal preferences and inclinations, and our several institutional contexts lead us to ask other questions and engage in quite different kinds of activities. In the present context, however, that may be a luxury we can no longer afford.

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